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The Gazette
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MONTREAL, SATURDAY, JULY 23, 1988

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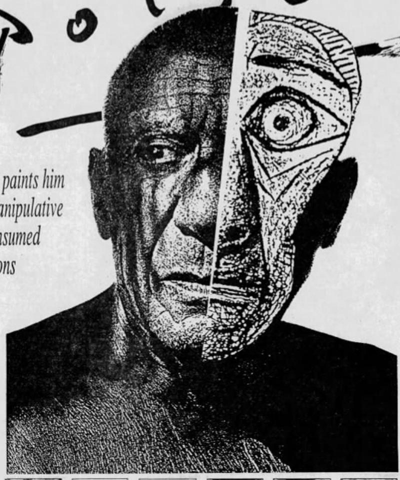
PICASSO'S Poison



A controversial biography of the artist paints him as purely satanic, a manipulative monster ultimately consumed by his own dark passions

PICASSO
Creator and Destroyer
By Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington
Simon and Schuster
558 pp. $34.95

By ANN DUNCAN
Gazette Art Reporter

If Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington is right, then Pablo Picasso was indeed a horrid, despicable, perverse man who revelled in humiliating his wives and many mistresses with the same primal urgency that he exhibited in his monumental masterpieces.

In Huffington's controversial biography, *Picasso: Creator and Destroyer*, the author concedes, sometimes grudgingly, that Picasso created some of the greatest art works of the 20th century. After all, who could denigrate the wistful, sorrow-laden canvases of the Blue Period, the haunting beauty of the Rose Period, the *Guernica* (his powerful protest against the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War), his ground-breaking *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* or the cubist school he co-founded with Georges Braque?

But for Huffington, Picasso also left behind in his formidable creative wake a devastating personal legacy of horror, sadism, mental breakdowns, latent homosexuality, rejected children, jilted mistresses and suicides.

And this mountain of human torment was, for the most part, inflicted knowingly and intentionally, Huffington maintains. Picasso was a past master of manipulation; he pushed people around with the same facility, deftness and delight with which he slathered paint on canvas.

In short, if Huffington is to be believed, Picasso was a deeply twisted and troubled man — a dark, magnetic force who ended up being consumed by his cruel, depraved and base passions, his fears of God and death, and his preoccupations with his own mortality. Throughout her book, she uses words like "evil," "Satanic," "monstrous" and "demonic" to describe the man who is accepted as one of the chief cultural demigods of our time.

"I was brought up, like so many of my generation, to see Picasso as the most extraordinary, the most compelling, the most original, the most protean, the most influential, the most seductive and certainly the most idolized artist of the 20th century," Huffington writes in her preface.

"But there was more to him, and (it was) darker. I was chilled by the way that he fought throughout his life the deepest existential battles of our century until he was ultimately destroyed by them."

That, in a nutshell, is the main thesis of Huffington's book. Instead of concentrating on Picasso's art, Huffington spends much of her time exploring the extremely sordid and sick underbelly of Picasso's extraordinarily complex private life. And it is her preoccupation with the private Picasso, rather than the visages of art he presented to the world, that has so many cultural figures outraged.

It is not so much that the personal life of Picasso is not fair game for a biography, the argument goes among the growing number of anti-Huffington critics on both sides of the Atlantic. Rather, it is the overriding and single-minded importance that she gives to such matters that is debatable. Huffington's portrait of Picasso is just too mean and one-sided, her detractors have charged.

It's true that her book at times reads more like a cross between *People* and *Midnight* magazines — a voyeuristic descent into the private sexual hell of one of our world's most influential figures — than as the scholarly work it alleges to be.

But Huffington, a Cambridge graduate in economics who is no aficionado of art and who gained literary prominence with a similarly controversial biography of opera diva Maria Callas, does make a good case for her argument.

With careful precision, she catalogues the string of Picasso's rejections and betrayals. His first wife, the Russian ballet dancer Olga Koklova, ended up half-crazed, tormented by Picasso's flaunting of his interminable conquests.

Marie-Thérèse Walter, who as a delicate and innocent teenager met Picasso and became the mother of one of his four children, hanged herself after decades of broken promises of Picasso's singular and "undying" love for her.

Similarly, Dora Maar, the beautiful and intellectual goddess of surrealism who was also a talented artist, was destroyed by nervous breakdowns and devastating electro-shock treatments. Picasso, according to Huffington, was so vicious that he would go out of his way to taunt Maar during her fragile attempts at recovery.

And yet it was Maar, Huffington maintains, who is responsible for raising Picasso's political consciousness to the point where he was capable of producing his landmark anti-war painting, the *Guernica*.

His second and last wife, Jacqueline, also committed suicide. She curled up in bed and shot herself 13 years after Picasso died in 1973 at the age of 91.

But it wasn't only Picasso's wives and mistresses who suffered from his viciousness. He rejected all of his children and grandchildren. His eldest son, Paulo, died at 54 of cirrhosis of the liver brought on by alcohol and drug abuse. Paulo's son, Pablito, killed himself by swallowing bleach after being turned away from Picasso's funeral. It took Pablito three months to die.

Picasso turned his mean-spiritedness on men as well as women. Of Braque, his soulmate in the birth of cubism, Picasso declared: "Braque is the woman who has loved me the most." Of Jean Cocteau, the respected poet who had a reputation as something of a vain dandy, Picasso sneered: "Cocteau was born with a pleat in his trousers. . . . You will find his works at every hairdresser's."

But it was to his longtime, intimate "friend" Max Jacob — if Picasso were ever capable of intimacy and friendship — that he was most dastardly. Jacob, a gentle poet and a Jew who had converted to Catholicism, was picked up by the Nazis during the Second World War and shipped to the concentration camp at Drancy, the way-station en route to the death camps.

When Picasso was asked to intervene — he never seemed to have trouble with the Nazis — he dismissed the request with: "It's not worth doing anything at all. Max is a little devil. He doesn't need our help to escape from prison." Jacob died at Drancy shortly thereafter of pneumonia.

The only person, according to Huffington, who survived her close association with Picasso was Françoise Gilot, his mistress of a decade, the mother of two of his children and the only woman who was known to walk away from him.

Huffington is unabashed in her praise of and admiration for Gilot, who tried to set her version of the Picasso record straight with a damning book, *Life With Picasso*, in 1964. Even so, Gilot was hampered at the time by libel laws and the fact that Picasso was still alive. But what she was eventually to tell Huffington was fundamental to the author's view of Picasso as a destroyer.

Picasso himself never apologized, never explained. "It's not what an artist does that counts, but what he is," Huffington quotes him as saying.

Herein lies the fundamental flaw of this book. Does it diminish the power, originality and genius of Picasso's enormous body of work to know that he was an extraordinarily nasty and twisted misogynist? By analogy, do we appreciate less the sublime beauty of Mozart's music to know that he, too, could be the vile, foul-mouthed, scatology-loving creature portrayed in Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus?*

I think not. Otherwise, by Huffington's moral yardstick of cultural measurements, we would then have to dismiss or revise drastically our opinions of the work of such greats as Wagner (a vehement anti-Semite), Degas (another anti-Semite), Beethoven (whose nasty streaks are explored in a recently released film by Paul Morrissey).

The list could go on and on.

But Huffington's biography is bound to make a lot of people take a sober second look at some of his paintings. Already there are suggestions that this book will influence the market for his works. Some of the people Huffington acknowledges in the book's credits have already sold their own Picassos.

How fast the winds can change in the fickle world of art.

Photos, Picasso

Picasso's women (from left): Fernande Olivier, his first mistress; Olga Koklova, his first wife; Marie-Thérèse Walter; intellectual muse Dora Maar; Françoise Gilot; last wife Jacqueline Picasso.

Rock writer gives painful lessons in post-New York reading

L.A. IS THE CAPITAL OF KANSAS
By Richard Meltzer
Harmony Books
246 pp. $22.95

By DON GILLMOR
Special to The Gazette

The subtitle of this book is "Painful Lessons in Post-New York Living," and few lessons are likely to be as painful as these 40 collected columns. Richard Meltzer left New York in that clichéd Big Apple funk: it was dirty, oppressive, expensive and the Greatest City on Earth. Still, he was turning 30 (in 1975) and he needed a change. His choices came down to L.A. and Montreal, two cities he had come to know as an itinerant rock critic. Montreal had cachet, a lot of pro sports and snow. He fled to Los Angeles.

After 13 years in L.A., what does he have to say about it? On West Beach: "West Beach is not on Main St. that chic st. that realtors're tryin' t' turn into ANOTHER GODDAM WESTWOOD,'s in the still funkee part o' Venice so the rich c'n ketch up on their quota of slumming."

On Linda Ronstadt: ". . . out in L.A. we got this farcical cross between Nixon and JFK of a governor named Jerry Brown who occasionally 'dates' Linda Ronstadt so we've gotta see her on the news all the time being/acting as guilelessly open-mouthed dumb as the sow (non-sexist 'generic' term) she is."

Well, I suppose it's no surprise that Meltzer has read William Burroughs. Actually, he boasts at one point, that's all he reads, that and a little Ferlinghetti, a bit of John Giorna. Meltzer appears to be the oldest living American (43) to a) discover the Beat writers b) take them literally and c) miss the point.

William Burroughs, at least, had a sense of humor. I guess you develop a sense of humor when you are a gay alcoholic junkie who accidentally but fatally shot his wife in the head during a narcotic interpretation of the William Tell anecdote in Mexico. Seventy years of those kinds of madcap hijinks are bound to bring out the imp in a person.

RICHARD MELTZER

Meltzer has bile and invective (as does Burroughs) but he doesn't have a sense of humor. Neither does he have the excuse of being a junkie and seeing the world in the convoluted rhythms of narcosis. He uses more exclamation marks than Tom Wolfe (19 on a good page), more italics than a rental agreement and as many upper-case phrases as a sentence can bear without actually becoming a headline. Emphasis is his thing. He doesn't have much to say but he says it louder than Robin Leach.

All that emphasis, all 13 of his years in L.A. and all 40 of these pieces go toward making a half-dozen observations:

1) People in L.A. don't walk, they drive everywhere.
2) Traffic can get ugly, parking is a problem.
3) People in L.A. never read, they watch TV.
4) There are a lot of blonde people in Los Angeles and many of them are quite dim.
5) The L.A. Kings aren't much of a hockey team.
6) The movie business isn't as glamorous as you might think.

L.A. itself is a tourist attraction populated by tourists, a hick town. ". . . outside hicks, hick tourists, ain't even *needed*. Tourist stores need 'em, sure, but hardly the town. 'Cause the town would be hick on its own without any assistance: the biggest HICK TOWN (per se) in all the hick land. Biggest in area, population, but a 'city' . . . 'big town' . . . 'major venue'? Surely you're kidding."

It is hard to disagree with Meltzer's observations, harder still to read them. It comes as no surprise that as a rock critic he reviewed albums by their cover art on occasion. There is nothing in these 246 pages that couldn't have been written from Montreal, Ohio, Sri Lanka. He has taken every L.A. cliché extant and delivered it with exclamation marks.

What is there to say about these hysterical columns? You could say they are, irretrievably, columns, for one thing. Or you could say:

Sometimes U have to wonder, truly WONDER at the fishbait amphetamine typing that *even if Maxwell Perkins worked on it for a year* would still read like that girl in high school with the overbite's poetry which you had to read OUT LOUD for 3 hrs before you could even get to, um, 1rst base (on a walk). And really, it makes you think, was it, you know, WORTH IT!!!

● *Don Gillmor is a Montreal writer.*

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